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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

“SARTOR RESARTUS” UP TO DATE¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

IF the Great War had not got on the nerves of Mr. H. G. Wells, he would not have written *Boon*; and we should have been deprived of the most brilliant and engrossing and savage piece of satirical writing since *Sartor Resartus*.

It is apparently Mr. Wells' little jest that he is not the author of *Boon*, and his publishers have abetted him in this amiable but rather foolish game of literary mystification.

The book is solemnly “copyright by Reginald Bliss,” and the publishers' Guide to Reviewers—set forth, with the subtle cunning peculiar to publishers, on the cover—tells us that “the authorship of the book is a mystery whose solution is likely to be a sensation.” Whether this profession of anonymity is a jest is not quite clear. Certainly there is no real “mystery” about the matter at all. Nor, seemingly, does Mr. Wells attempt to make one of it in his semi-jocose introduction, wherein he speaks of “the pressure of a certain inseparable intimacy between Mr. Reginald Bliss and myself,” and of his having “a kind of first-hand knowledge of [the book's] contents.” He goes on to hope that the reader—by which he means, he says, the reviewer—“will be able to see the reasonableness and the necessity of distinguishing between me and Mr. Reginald Bliss.” Bliss is Bliss, he insists, “and Wells is Wells. And Bliss can write all sorts of things that Wells could not do.”

Undoubtedly! and an excellent jest *that* is! For, under his semi-serious guise of anonymity, Mr. Wells has run amuck through the crowded and already sufficiently turbulent highways of the contemporary world, and has bowled over very nearly everybody in sight, abroad and at home, from

¹ *Boon, The Mind of the Race, The Wild Asses of the Devil, and The Last Trump*. By Reginald Bliss. George H. Doran Company, New York, 1915.

the Kaiser and Lord Morley and Lord Haldane and Mr. Henry James and Mr. Bernard Shaw and the militarists and the American public to Mr. Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Scarcely a head escapes, if it is at all in view; and even being dead does not save you from the joyous ferocity of Mr. Wells, for he takes a whack at Homer and Goethe, Schopenhauer and Mr. Gladstone. The great and the almost-great are impartially tumbled over in the *mêlée*; and even the supremely respectable fall a prey to the general frightfulness: as witness, in the section called "The Natural History of Greatness," his notes on the career of the blameless and admirable Mrs. Humphrey Ward—"the last of the British Victorian Great"—in which we are assured that "the rumor that she is represented as a sea goddess at the base of the Queen Victoria Memorial is unfounded"; and the description of Mr. Gladstone's arrival in Hell, greeted by cries of "Speech! Speech!" . . . eliciting "the first delicious promise of a Home Rule movement which should break the last feeble links of Celestial Control." Nor is any one too slightly conspicuous to hope for clemency at the hands of the bloodthirsty Mr. Wells—as you can see by observing the dreadful immortalization that has befallen an unfortunate gentleman named Osborn, who apparently writes pieces for the London *Morning Post*.

No—it is quite clear that Mr. Wells could not decently have issued a formal confession of authorship to this book, and one supposes that the gesture of deprecation was necessary. But it is not, after all, a particularly able joke that he and his publishers have sprung; for that Mr. Wells could escape, in any reasonably intelligent quarter, the indisputable responsibility for *Boon* is hardly credible. However, to set at rest the mind of any reader—or reviewer—who may be tempted to accommodate the desire of Mr. Wells that he "see the reasonableness of distinguishing between me and Mr. Reginald Bliss," and to play upon our author a jest that is doubtless as poor a one as his own, we hereby unqualifiedly affirm that we *know* Mr. Wells to be the author of *Boon*.

Whereupon, having duly succumbed to whatever joke may be implicit in this amiable author-publisher hoax, we can proceed to regard a little more directly the remarkable production which inspired it.

Once upon a time a well-beloved romancer—it may have

been Mr. Robert W. Chambers—wrote a tale about a beautiful artist's model (she was, incidentally, a perfect lady) who, about to enter, after a period of prolonged deliberation, into a state of concubinage with a gentleman friend, was wont to refer to the coming experience as "the Great Change." (We are almost, but not quite, sure of the capital initials.) Now, *Boon* is the story of Mr. Wells' mind, wrought upon by a Great Change of a different sort—of a mind made sick and a little mad (but mad only north-north-west) by the Great Catastrophe. It could never have been written but by Mr. Wells. It could never have been written save for the War. It is a bitter and a terrible and a merciless book, and yet there is at its heart a noble exaltation. It is jeering, mocking, impious, trivial, peevish; and it is a masterpiece of philosophical satire. The *Boon* of the title—George Boon—was the deceased friend of Mr. Bliss-Wells, and this is a sheaf of quotations, comments, allusions—unconscionably discursive, fragmentary and fantastic—relating to the hypothetical gentleman's literary remains. And Boon, of course, is Mr. Wells' mouthpiece, through whom are uttered his ideas concerning all things that occupy the thoughts of contemporary man. The book is a medley, an intellectual *revue*, a literary Luna Park, in which you bump-the-bumps or dizzily shoot-the-chutes over and down and up and across Mr. Wells' convictions about authors and politics and economics and biology and history and philosophy. You are invited to study three unfinished productions of the late Boon—*The Mind of the Race*, *The Wild Asses of the Devil*, and *The Last Trump*, all diligently assembled and annotated and "prepared for publication" by Mr. Bliss. The book is, as the accomplished Bliss observes, "an obituary of more than George Boon." For Boon died with his age. And what Mr. Wells has given us is, in some sort, a memorial to a dead age: to the dead past of the world—a critical phantasmagoria in which we see, as in sleep-chasings, the men and things and ideas of that incredible *ante-bellum* time that now seems almost as if it had never been.

The book is a welter of contemporaneity, appallingly specific in its allusions—allusions that are often contemptuous, or, at best, furtively satirical; as, for example, a marvelous scene between Mr. Henry James and Mr. George Moore (a triumph of delicate and dreadful wit which it would be hard to match in English letters), who appear at a

world-conference upon the momentous subject of "The Mind of the Race," attended, among many others, by Mr. Gosse, Mr. William Archer, Mr. Yeats, Mr. James and Mr. Moore, and emissaries of Lord Northcliffe and Mr. Hearst. The two distinguished novelists talk with complete verisimilitude, and together, neither paying the slightest heed to the other; so that while Mr. James is observing: "Owing it as we do, very, very largely to our friend Gosse, to that peculiar, that honest but restless and, as it were, at times almost malignantly ambitious organizing energy of our friend, I cannot altogether—altogether, even if in any case I should have taken so extreme, so devastatingly isolating a step as, to put it violently, *stand out*; yet I must confess to a considerable anxiety, a kind of distress, an apprehension, the terror, so to speak——" at the same moment Mr. Moore is saying meditatively to himself: "Little, exquisite shoulders without a touch of color and with just that suggestion of rare old ivory in an old shop-window in some out-of-the-way corner of Paris that only the most patient abstinence from baths and the brutality of soaping——." Surely mockery could be no more exquisite than this! And the book is full of such delectable things—as the no less perfect scene in the special train which is taking the conferees to a subsequent congress at Bâle upon the absorbing topic of "The Mind of the Race": a journey during which Mr. Bernard Shaw insists upon thrusting himself into the center of activities garbed in hand-painted pajamas, while Mr. Upton Sinclair, "having carried out his ideal of an innocent frankness to a logical completeness in his traveling equipment," is forcibly wrapped in blankets by the train officials—a journey made memorable also by the presence of a horse-van at the end containing Mr. Maurice Hewlett's charger, and "a large, quiet sheep, the inseparable pet of Mr. Arthur Christopher Benson." Wherefrom it will be seen that Mr. Wells is not without the gift of malice.

The book is Carlyle in a gayer key. It is *Sartor Resartus* crossed by *Alice in Wonderland*, with Mr. Max Beerbohm hovering nearby and interjecting outrageous intellectual blasphemies. It is ferocious and unsparing, but it is far from being inexpensively cynical. It is, justly considered, a corrective. It has aspiration, and it has vision. The black stream of consequences that must come from the War will flow, as Mr. Wells sees, for centuries; but "all this multitudinous

individual unhappiness is still compatible with a great progressive movement in the general mind. . . . Horrible possibilities have to be realized, and they can be realized only by experience; complacencies, fatuities have to be destroyed; we have to learn and relearn what Boon once called 'the bitter need of honesty.' We must see these things from the standpoint of the Race Life, whose days are hundreds of years." And there is the great task of literature: "the great task of becoming the thought and the expressed intention of the race, the task of taming violence, organizing the aimless, destroying error, the task of waylaying the Wild Asses of the Devil and sending them back to Hell. . . . And we have to do it, because we know, in spite of the darkness, the wickedness, the haste and hate,—we know in our hearts . . . that judgment is all about us and God stands close at hand."

LAWRENCE GILMAN.